



Creative Writing

Tanika Gupta on Voice

Derek Neale

Tanika Gupta has written for theatre, radio, film and television, including episodes of Grange Hill and EastEnders. When I met up with her, I wanted to ask about her stage writing. We began by talking about scene length, and her play, Fragile Land.

Tanika Gupta

Basically for telly, the scenes are very short. You're writing the scenes that are about a page long. And if you wrote a scene that was a page long for stage, it wouldn't go anywhere. With the soaps, they're so story-lined by script editors that in many respects, you're kind of joining the dots so you don't have the freedom to use your imagination very much, it's very much about writing within a certain guideline, writing within a certain storyline and making their storylines work. I think, Fragile Land was the first stage play I've ever written which had such short scenes and I have to say I was actually quite nervous about it, because I worried that, I think there were about twenty scenes in the play which is a ridiculously large amount of scenes and I've always been told, when you write for stage, you have to have long scenes that go somewhere, dig very deep into the characters' journeys and all the rest of it, but for Fragile Land, it worked quite well because although I'd written actually quite long scenes, we started messing around with them quite a lot during rehearsals and cutting them up quite a lot so that it was almost like film or a television script, in that scenes were about, sometimes only about a page long. And then you'd suddenly put the spotlight on to somebody else and then off they'd go. But it worked because it upped the pace; it meant that your attention was always drawn to another action but generally it worked very well.

Derek Neale

But what about the people in her plays? I asked about her characters and dialogue.

Tanika Gupta

That's the most enjoyable part of writing, I feel, is actually just inventing characters. And I mean, you just need to look around at your friends and you immediately see that everyone has their own way of speaking. I think, in the early days, I used to write a lot of characters with stammers. [Laughs] And a lot of characters who spoke in a certain kind of cockney rhyming slang kind of way but as I've got more experienced, I've realised, actually, you just need to sit down and listen to the way people speak. Even if it's, you know, the person in the corner shop or the guy that served you cigarettes over the counter, you find yourself doing this sort of listening in quite a lot and certainly, when I was writing Fragile Land, I did a lot of hanging around bus stops listening to teenagers and being absolutely shocked at how much they swore but hearing words that I'd never heard before like 'buff' and stuff like that. Which I immediately went home and scribbled on a piece of paper and thought, Marvellous word, must use that, and then I thought, But I don't know what it means, [laughs] and so I'd have to, to go out and ask people What does that word mean? I'm not consciously trying to invent an idiom, it just kind of happens. Certainly with Fragile Land, I had a very strong idea that I wanted to have an angry young man in there but who was, actually had a heart of gold and that was Omar, and I did a lot of hanging around bus stops and I remember the first conversation I listened in to these two very, very kind of scruffy-looking sixteen year old boys who I thought were a bit scary but I thought I must listen to what they're saying, and basically, their conversation was this,

'Oy, you know that euro thing, man? Well, it's gonna happen, you know. That Pete Mandelson don't like but I think it's great. I mean, like, you go to Paris and all that, you know?'

And it's just that whole thing of how people look and how they speak and it's just so different.

Derek Neale

Writing such voices in a script seems to have a lot to do with choosing the right word order. She went on to tell me about this.

Tanika Gupta

That's where it helps being Asian because I'm surrounded by very bad English in the family. [Laughs] Not bad English but English that's spoken differently with sentences that are put backwards almost so I've always grown up with that, with uncles and aunts, certainly not my parents, my parents spoke very, very good English, but I remember an uncle said to me once,

'You must come to my office one day and bop.' ie you must pop into my office and of course, I put these in my play because I mean, they're just so funny. I remember my father died and there was a whole load of people that came to the house, people were weeping and wailing, and it was a terrible, terrible time and as people were leaving, one of my uncles said to me and my brother who were standing by the door, completely devastated, and he said to us, 'Make sure your mother is well-seduced tonight.' And we went, 'I beg your pardon?' And he went, 'No, no, I mean, very well seduced.' And what he meant was sedated, 'Make sure you mother is well sedated tonight'. But I mean, can you imagine at a time like that? [Laughs] And it's just... [Laughs] And of course, I put it into my play, I put it into my play Waiting Room, that sort of language is just hysterical.

Kabir, the gardener in Sanctuary speaks a strange English, it's very, very correct but it's all back to front. I mean, he speaks, it's not grammatically correct, he's very articulate but again, that came very easily to me because of listening and then, actually, you realise that Italians speak like that and a lot of Jewish people speak like that and, I mean, I do talk a lot as well, I do get in cabs and talk to Afghani taxi drivers and you kind of hear, I think it's that whole thing of the love of stories and listening to people telling their stories and people will only tell you their stories if you talk to them and if you tell them a story, I think it works both ways. I think, you can't just go into a cab and just keep very quiet and then hope that somebody will tell you something. You get words all the time and little phrases like, I remember going in a cab and it was an Afghani chap and he said to me, 'You know what they call our taxi firm, they call us Taliban Taxis' because there were so many Afghanis working there, and he said this as a joke, and of course, I put it in the play. I put it in Fragile Land. [Laughter]